

## A Study of the Organizational Culture at a Higher Education Institution (Case Study: Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE))

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### ABSTRACT

The article offers an analysis of the organizational culture at a higher education institution as in the case of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, conducted in order to study the students' involvement in this culture and to draw conclusions as to what organizational culture principles are internalized by the students. The study used survey methodology and the OCAI (Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument) tool. The article's content is based on the methods of analyzing, synthesizing and aggregating the data acquired during the empirical study. The article concludes that, in the students' opinion, a hierarchy culture prevails at the university and that the students potentially expect some changes in the style of that organizational culture; it should be pointed out that this piece of diagnostics sets the direction for further development in terms of which the progress of the university's organizational culture will have to be consistently adjusted and stimulated.

### KEYWORDS

organizational culture, higher education institution, model, OCAI tool.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:25 August 2016  
Revised:26 September 2016  
Accepted:07 November 2016

## Introduction

At the present stage of social development branded as “information society,” the sociocultural space is increasingly defined by the intensification of various information and communication streams and relations. It maintains the interaction between diverse types of communications of varied scale; facilitates the major breakthroughs in the structure of this space that are later put to practice through the science programs and technologies of the modern

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management environment. One of the key components of the modern sociocultural space is corporate or otherwise organizational culture, which stands for a special sort of communication; since any organization is a human community on the one hand, which is specific, united by business goals and targets and on the other hand, it is similar to any other community, because its employees — the building blocks of this community — are living people with their own beliefs, capabilities and psychological traits, raised within the context of a certain culture.

Organizational culture is the company's social and spiritual field, shaped by material and non-material, visible and disguised, conscious and unconscious processes and phenomena that together determine the consonance of philosophy, ideology, values, problem-solving approaches and behavioral patterns of the company's personnel, and are capable of driving the organization towards success (Solomanidina, 2007). Organizational culture affects community members not so much through red-tape procedures, as through normative control (Harris and Ogbonna, 2011), since it includes a system of rules and work guidelines, both formal and informal, as well as a range of rituals and traditions, behavioral patterns of the employees working within the given organizational structure, management styles, and levels of cooperation. The normative control is based on a system of values that govern the enterprise as a community and appeal to the deepest human social purposes targeted at the senses of community and integration (Knights and Willmott, 1987), mutual dependence and care, altruism and positive paradigms (Schein, 2010). Helping employees internalize corporate values to make them feel personal and synergistically aligned with the company's values has a pronounced positive effect on the organization's performance (Posner, 2010). The particular ways in which organizational culture affects company employees as members of a specific community also include the effect it causes on their work attitude, their sense of obligation and responsibility towards their colleagues and the entire organization (Howell et al., 2012). It is important to emphasize that ultimately, a key integral part of organizational culture is the state of its ecology of communication, both between individuals and within a group (Grigoryan, 2015).

A university's organizational culture is a very special case, since it is based on the fact that an educational unit is a self-organized system resting on the principles of knowledge and learning, which serves as a platform for relations of various nature, such as the internal relations between management, employees and students (the latter being the consumers of educational services); external relations with alumni, prospective students and their parents, and employers as customers; and, certainly, the partnerships and competitions with other educational institutions. The complexity and diversity of these relations make it necessary to study the university's organizational culture in reliance on the students' attitude to it and their engagement in it.

### Literature Review

The specific character and peculiarities of the mechanism of a university's organizational culture is an important problem for the researchers of organizational culture in general.

Based on the Competing Values Framework designed by R.E. Quinn (1988) that describes four types of organizational culture – clan, adhocracy, hierarchy and market, – K. Cameron and S. Freeman (Cameron and Freeman,

1991) elaborated the key attributes of this classification. This system covers the following aspects of an organization:

- flexibility and incremental progress vs. stability and control;
- external focus and differentiation vs. internal focus and integration.

In addition, this model can be used to diagnose the company's aspects that are fundamental to its organizational culture:

- organization's dominant characteristics, i.e. the definition of the organization's general structure;
- leadership style prevailing across the organization;
- employee management or the approach to employee relations that determines workplace environment;
- organization's cohesion forces or mechanisms that help the organization hold together;
- strategic points of focus that determine which areas drive the organization's strategy;
- success criteria that demonstrate how success is defined and what exactly leads to reward.

Based on numerous iterations, four fundamental cultures have been singled out: a clan culture has a focus on the internal flexibility, concern for people and good attitude towards consumers; an adhocracy culture has an external focus combined with high flexibility and individual treatment for people; a hierarchy culture focuses on internal support and values stability and control; a market culture has an external focus and values stability and control.

Expanding on this model, McNay (1995) gives a definition to the organizational culture of higher education institutions in terms of two dimensions: the form and intensity of control, and the focus on policy and strategy. He highlights such types of university organizational culture as:

- 1) entrepreneurial, combining firm policy and loose operational control, focusing on market, external opportunities, and relationships with stakeholders;
- 2) corporate, consisting of tight policy and operational control, dominance of senior management and executive authority;
- 3) collegiate, consisting of loose policy and loose operational control, decentralization, focusing on individual freedom;
- 4) bureaucratic, consisting of loose policy and tight operational control, focusing on rules, regulations, and precedents.

Based on this concept, Ye. Novikova (2012) describes three models of organizational culture in modern universities.

- 1) Bureaucratic model of a higher education institution. This model posits that the majority of universities have properties intrinsic to a bureaucratic organization: the requirement for having a certain set of skills and expertise in order to be offered a position, the fixed salary and recognition of one's job status, the exceptional nature of suitable employers for a job-seeker (only a university and no other organizations), making the organization a center of one's life style, the life-long tenure as the safety net, the distinct boundary between the personal and organization's property. There are also the formal policy and rules that form part of a system of regulations and procedures, which maintain the university's integrity and control its operation. The bureaucratic elements become most obvious to students who deal with them as part of their daily routine (all sorts of records, registrations and requirements). These characteristics shape the corresponding corporate culture.



2) Collegiate community model. The key principle of this model stipulates that a university should not be established in the spirit of bureaucratic organizations. It encourages all members of the academic community, particularly the teaching personnel, to take a full-fledged part in management. This in fact means the “professional” authority of the teaching staff, which is closely related to the “professionalization” of the academic community.

3) Political model of a university. In the context of this model, a higher education institution is viewed not only as a single entity, but also as an assembly of different groups pursuing various targets and interests; the accent is placed on setting up policies and goals; the problem of conflicts is seen as inherent to the university life; close attention is paid to the dynamics of the processes taking place at the university.

The three concepts are compared in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparative study of the three models of university management

Characteristics	Political	Bureaucratic	Collegiate
General image	Political system	Hierarchic bureaucracy	Professional community
Evolution process	Close attention	Little attention	Little attention
Conflict	Considered a norm; viewed as a key to assessing the policy effects	Considered an abnormality: it must be controlled by bureaucratic sanctions	Considered an abnormality: gets eliminated from the “true community of scientists”
Concept of social structure	Pluralist, divided into subcultures and various interest groups	Unitary, integrated by formal bureaucracy	Unitary, the united “community of scientists”
Theoretical basis	Theory of conflict, theory of group interests, theory of open systems, theory of community power	M. Weber’s model for bureaucracy, the model for a classical formal system	Regarding an organization from a “human relations” perspective, literature on professionalism
Concept of decision-making	Negotiations and the process of political influence	Rationalist, formal bureaucratic procedures. Focus on implementation	Joint collegiate decisions
Setting up goals and policies: formulation or implementation?	Focus on formulation	Focus on implementation	Not entirely clear: possibly, a greater focus on formulation

There is currently an active research on this, with researchers looking to study the properties and components of the organizational culture in higher education institutions through the application of both surveys and theoretical methodology. Thus, T. Koycheva (2015) conducted a study of the organizational culture at a teachers’ university, aiming to find a way of improving the university’s efficiency in a competitive environment and identifying the role organizational culture plays in the university development. K. Gnezdilova (2014) studied the organizational aspects of the intradepartmental relations in the context of organizational culture; a group of scientists (Jamanbalayeva et al.,

2013) conducted a social research titled “The lecturer through the eyes of colleagues” at the Kazakh National University, which contributed to the knowledge about the effect caused by organizational culture requirements on the institution’s image and the behavior of its teachers. Apart from these studies, there is also an ongoing research looking to find out how students see the organizational culture within their higher education institution and consider the main obstacles in the way of their perception of this culture (Karelskaya, 2013, Shcherbakova and Potravnaya, 2014, Gnedova et al., 2015).

### Research Methodology

To prepare this article, the authors used various methods of synthesizing the data acquired from student surveys. The Competing Values Framework (the OCAI model — Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument — adapted for higher education institutions) was chosen as a survey tool. The reason for choosing this model was that it provides the means to separate efficiency criteria (flexibility, incremental progress, organization’s dynamics) from stability criteria (stability, control), as well as external focus criteria from internal focus criteria; and to assess not only the present state, but also the future intended one.

### Results and Discussion

In the context of universities, organizational culture is by its nature a somewhat different entity compared to the organizational culture of manufacturing enterprises. It has three perspectives: the organizational culture of a higher education institution (department) as an independent organization; the organizational culture of students and teachers as a social group, and the organizational culture of the university as part of the company where its graduates will be employed, as a training platform for future members of the professional corporation (Boykova, 2011). Unlike the organizational culture of commercial organizations oriented at the maximum profit, the organizational culture of educational institutions has a different vector, namely the unleashing of the creative potential of teachers and students, the realization of personal and professional skills, the generation of essential competencies, the harmonization of internal relations, and the improvements of psychological climate (Dryomina, et al., 2015).

To ensure an effective functioning of the organizational culture at a higher education institution, it is important to come up with a comprehensive strategy intended to provide the continuous control and monitoring of all changes that take place within its walls. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare a plan for internal and external research that can help to make the most accurate and unbiased assessment of the existing and preferred states of organizational culture (Vasyakin et al., 2015). Internal research is a convenient and effective tool for acquiring management data. Based on the type of results that need to be achieved in the course of a study, internal research can be broken down to the following categories:

1. The category of targets and tasks (Why and for what reason are we conducting this study?).
2. The category of tools and technologies (In what way do we conduct this study?).
3. The category of case studies (When do we conduct this study?).



4. The category of the research area: business processes, communications, efficiency, personnel, social relations, organizational culture (What are we studying?).

Prior to conducting the study, it is important to specify clear operational (mid-term and short-term) and strategic (long-term) goals of the higher education institution, which will serve as the core for surveys and tests. The diagnostic tools and technologies that can be used to gather data on the state of the institution's organizational culture include questionnaires and general questioning, in-depth interviews, problem discussion with focus groups, content analysis and observation.

This study was based on the materials obtained at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE) — one of the major economic universities in Russia. Founded in February 1907 as the Moscow Commercial Institute, the first Russian higher education facility specializing in economics; later converted into the Moscow Institute for National Economy in 1919, then into the Russian Academy of Economics in 1991, and finally into the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in August 2010, the university features an exciting, rich and controversial history of its establishment and development.

Over the years of its existence, the university has gained a well-earned reputation of one of the leading higher education institutions and research centers that has made a huge contribution to the national economy, as well as to the country's economic and commercial education. Today, PRUE is a major educational, scientific and industrial facility. The university maintains a fruitful partnership with over 80 universities and educational institutions around the globe.

The University's organizational culture is built in view of its specific nature, by combining the historical traditions of the oldest Russian higher education institution for economics with the requirements of the modern educational and research process. The mission claimed by the university is the leadership in the education of versatile professionals in economic field, based on the synthesis of historical traditions, scientific innovation and the successful and stable development of the university; the establishment and distribution of practice-oriented economic and commercial education through the combination of historical heritage and entrepreneurial traditions as the primary social value; and the raising of enlightened and competent individuals capable of taking the lead in global economy.

The biggest brand value of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics is its more than 100 years of experience in being one of the flagships of economic and commercial education in Russia, the alma mater of national entrepreneurs and the country's intellectual, political and business elite. Its other key corporate values include commitment to traditions, diligent work, corporate loyalty, sense of self-worth, comradeship and cooperation, adherence to spirituality and social morality (Ivleva, 2016).

The University is involved in such activities as the implementation of educational initiatives; the training, professional re-training and further training of research and teaching personnel; the conduction of fundamental and practical research; the arrangement of important social events in the field of education and science.

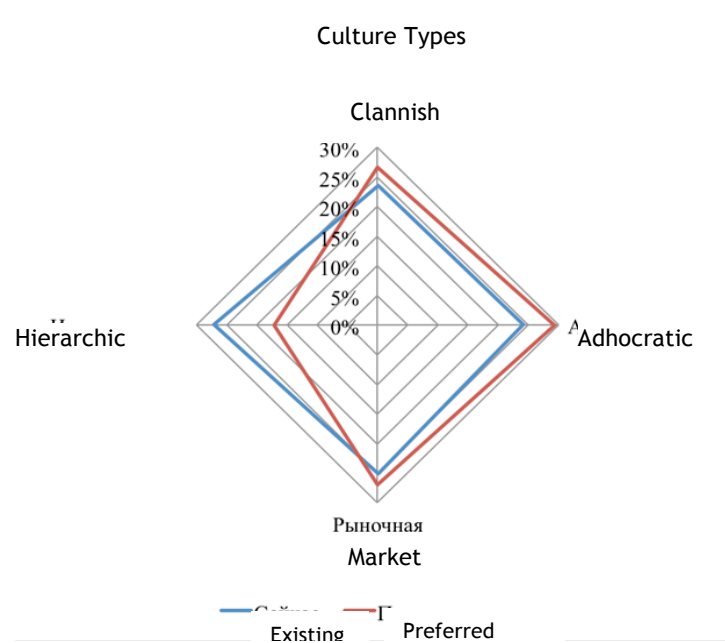
The target audience for the survey comprised university students of the first and second years. The purpose was to find out how well the students are

involved in the organizational culture, what is their perception of the characteristic features of the university's organizational culture. It was planned to later design guidelines and methods for advancing the process of establishing norms and principles of the university's organizational culture amongst freshmen. One of the reasons for choosing the applied OCAI (Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument) model adapted for the circumstances of a higher education institution was because it provides the means to draw insights about both the current status quo and the one desired by respondents.

The following results have been obtained at the end of the conducted study.

Key characteristics of the organization are shown in Figure 1. This indicator provides a general picture of the students' perception of the University. Based on the survey results, we can say that there is a certain prevalence of a hierarchy culture. Of those surveyed, 29% believe that "the university has a rigid structure and is strictly controlled by the management, whereby all actions are determined by rules, instructions and procedures." The options "dynamics and innovation" and "goal- and task-oriented attitude" each scored 22%.

The preferred situation does not bear significant difference to the present one. The students would like to lower the level of hierarchy by 21% in order to improve clan indicators and the orientation at family values (up to 27%), increase adhocracy level and focus on innovation and risk (up to 25%), and shift towards market with its result-oriented attitude (up to 26%).



**Figure 1.** Key characteristics of the higher education institution

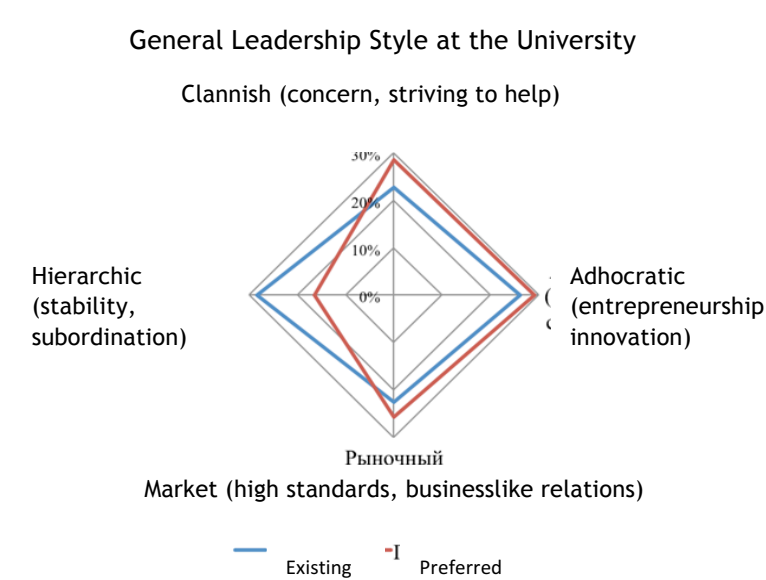
General leadership style at the university is illustrated by Figure 2. This indicator demonstrates how students regard formal and informal university leaders. Currently, based on the survey results, hierarchic leadership style dominates (28%). This leadership style implies the authority of rational coordinators and organizers sustaining the smooth growth of the organization. The next position is taken by the adhocratic style (26%), whereby the university





leaders assume the roles of innovators and entrepreneurs, prepared to take risks. The clannish (leader as a mentor and tutor) and market (leader as a strict manager and a rigorous competitor) styles both scored 23%.

In the longer term, the students would like to see leaders exercising clannish and adhocratic leadership styles (29% each). This can only be achieved if the application of hierarchic style is decreased to 17%.

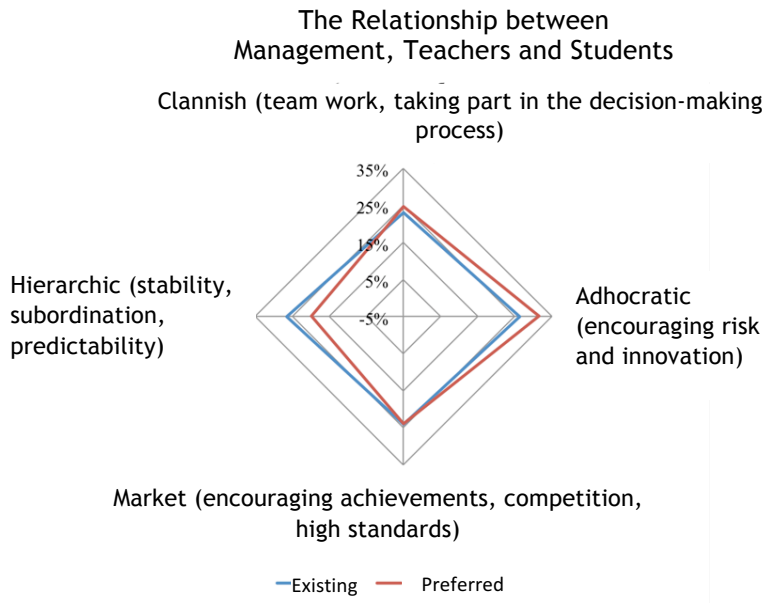


**Figure 2.** General leadership style at the university

Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship between management, teachers and students. This indicator describes the relationship between the students, teachers and university employees. At present, this relationship is built on two types of behavior: adhocratic and hierarchic (26% each). On the one side, this is a long-term oriented relationship regulated by formal rules. On the other side, the management promotes personal freedom and initiative, making an effort to create the best environment for innovation.

In the longer term, the students would welcome a decrease in hierarchy down to 20% and an increase in the levels of adhocratic characteristics up to 31%, and the same regarding the clannish characteristics — from 23% to 25%.



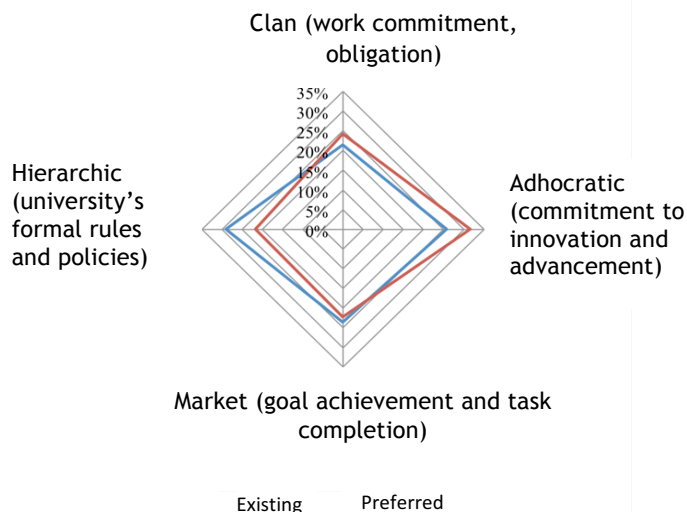


**Figure 3.** The relationship between management/teachers and students

The nature of relations holding the organization together is shown in Figure 4. At the moment, all internal processes are bound together using formal rules and official policies, characteristic of hierarchic style (29%).

In the longer term, the students would rather see the commitment to innovation and entrepreneurship, and risk sentiment as the linchpins of the university (32% of respondents).

### The Linchpins of All Internal Processes

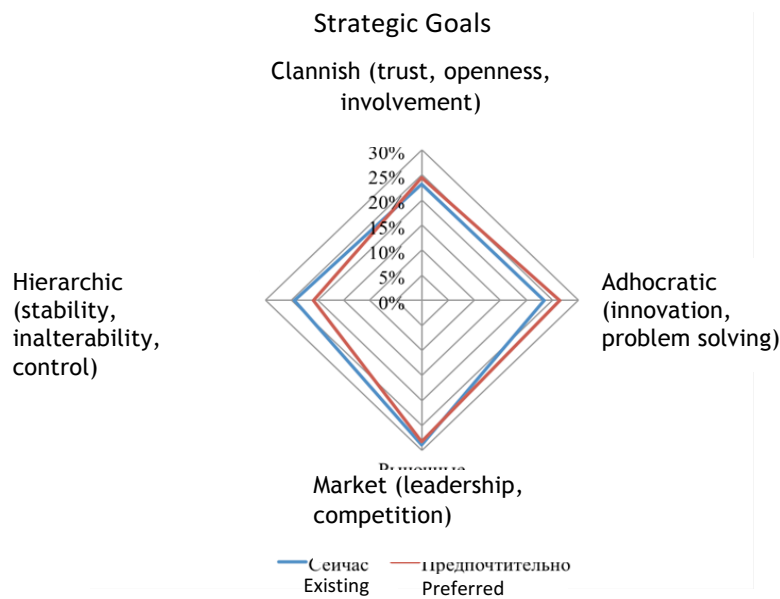


**Figure 4.** The linchpin components of all internal processes

Strategic values are illustrated by Figure 5. This indicator reflects the university's values that serve as the cornerstone of its growth strategy. In the students' opinion, the university's current position is almost completely aligned



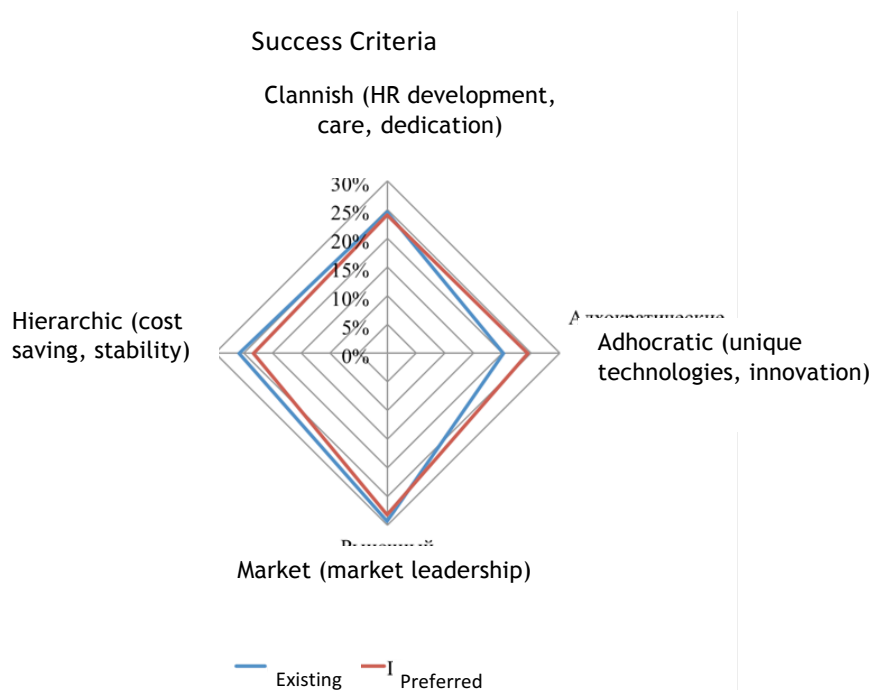
with their vision, which implies that a university must be oriented at leadership, competitive actions; it must solve its tasks in a timely manner and reach measurable goals (29% — now, 28% — preferably); the desirable results will most probably be achieved in future through a slight shift towards growth orientation, innovation and the solving of ongoing problems by means of purchasing new resources (from 20% of existing adhocratic features to 24% of preferable ones). It will only be possible to achieve the target goals by stepping outside the “comfort zone,” which will help lower the hierarchic index from 24% down to 20%.



**Figure 5.** Strategic goals of a higher education institution

Figure 6 shows success criteria. This indicator determines the main factors that can help to measure the university’s progress.

The respondents have agreed that both at this moment and in the years to come, the major success criterion will be the university’s leadership in the education market, which corresponds to a market culture (29% now and 28% — preferably). Also, the future success factors will include the possession of a unique technology, innovation (a property of adhocracy — 24%) and the development of human resources combined with care for students (characteristic of clans — 24%).



**Figure 5.** Success criteria for a higher education institution

## Conclusion

The organizational culture in modern higher education institutions relies on the continuous involvement of teachers and students that intends to not only realize their personal and professional skills together with career development, but also to harmonize the in-company and intragroup relations, to improve the psychological climate. That is the proper environment to nurture “human potential,” “human capital,” the “intangible assets” of educational corporations, so by facilitating such process it is possible to inspire the feeling of working towards a common goal in all members of the university corporation, which in turn will increase the strength, durability and quality of the organization’s structure, and ultimately improve its performance. The organization’s values are above all defined by its goals and mission, and if such goals are set, it becomes a stable growing system, maintaining an efficient interaction with the world around it. The role organizational culture plays in the fulfillment of a university’s strategy can hardly be overstated, since it is the mirror that reflects the university’s special and unique features.

The most important prerequisite for shaping the organizational culture of a higher education institution is seemingly the understanding that it is a holistic entity, and it requires only a comprehensive approach to the process of its shaping or changing, as well as a wide range of planning efforts.

Currently, the examined university shows the signs of a prevailing hierarchy culture, which its students believe must be gradually changed to an adhocracy culture, while at the same time enhancing market and clan components, apart from the adhocratic ones. It is essential to consistently correct and stimulate the development of the university’s organizational culture in order to eventually reach the “ideal.” To that end, it is necessary to plan a



range of initiatives aimed at improving and advancing the components that help support and develop the university's organizational culture. The promotion of innovation, adherence to business practices and result orientation should make an adequate contribution to the future growth of the university. This piece of diagnostics sets the direction for further development in terms of which the progress of the university's organizational culture will have to be consistently adjusted and stimulated.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix A

Adapted questionnaire for assessing the organizational culture of a higher education institution using the OCAI method

1	Key Characteristics	Existing Score	Preferable Score
A	The university is unique in its features. It is akin to a large family. Students have much in common.		
B	The university is vibrant and imbued with a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation. Students are ready to sacrifice and take risk.		
C	The university is result-oriented, with a focus on having the tasks completed. Students place a high emphasis on competition and goal achievement.		
D	The university has a rigid structure and is strictly regulated. All actions are determined by rules, instructions and procedures		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
2	General leadership style at the university	Existing Score	Preferable Score
A	Cares about students. Can be approached for help in time of need.		
B	Encourages entrepreneurship, innovation.		
C	High standards for everything, a highly competitive environment for students.		



D	Requires total submission, regular reports, stability.		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Relations with students</b>	<b>Existing Score</b>	<b>Preferable Score</b>
A	Promotion of team work, consensus and participation in decision-making		
B	Promotion of individual risk-taking, innovation, freedom and self-reliance		
C	Stringent requirements, fierce fight for a competitive edge and recognition of achievements		
D	Demand for submission, predictability and stability in relations.		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The university's linchpin</b>	<b>Existing Score</b>	<b>Preferable Score</b>
A	Commitment to work and mutual trust. Obligation and responsibility are rated high.		
B	Commitment to innovation and improvement. Aspiration to be on the frontline.		
C	Focus on achieving goals and completing tasks. Aggressiveness and striving to be number one.		
D	Formal rules and official policies, the willing to support an orderly development of the university.		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Strategic goals</b>	<b>Existing Score</b>	<b>Preferable Score</b>
A	Focus on humane development, high level of trust, openness and involvement.		
B	Focus on the acquisition of new resources, finding solutions to new problems, the search for all things new and innovative.		
C	Striving to be number one, focus on competing with other higher education facilities.		
D	Focus on preserving stability and inalterability. What matters is control and smoothness of all operations.		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Success criteria</b>	<b>Existing Score</b>	<b>Preferable Score</b>
A	Human resource development, cooperation, engagement in the process and concern for students.		
B	Possessing a unique or cutting-edge technology, leadership, innovation.		
C	Competitive leadership in the education market.		
D	Commercial viability, seamless roadmaps, low costs.		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>